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"Little World" of Spices

Pat McBride

Iowa State College

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A PEEK INTO AN EXOTIC AND ROMANTIC

"Little World" of

THE exotic and romantic atmosphere of the spice trade is not as remote as camel caravans in history books or far-away Oriental lands. While visiting Tone Brothers Coffee and Spice Company in Des Moines, our institutional management class discovered a world of fragrant aromas, peeked into intriguing barrels and bags from around the world and heard a multitude of fascinating stories about the origin of spices and coffee.

Mr. Jay E. Tone, president, ushered us into the front office of the old brick building which was built by his father and uncle in 1894. In the center of the sunny room was a round walnut table with a display of leaves, seeds and barks of many spices and herbs. Around the edge of the table were small piles of different coffee blends. An antique brass urn heating water for coffee samples steamed in the corner.

A glass apothecary jar on the table contained dark spears resembling stalks of asparagus tips. Our host explained that these were the seed pods of the vanilla plant, a tropical orchid vine.

One of the most interesting spices was hidden in a tiny tin box. As we carefully opened the box, we saw a few thin orange strands. This was saffron, the most expensive of all spices. The strands originate as stigmas of a crocus-like plant grown exclusively in the Mediterranean area. Each plant yields only two stigmas which must be picked by hand. Little wonder that saffron costs about \$40 a pound. A homemaker may purchase a small box containing a thimbleful of saffron for 15 cents. A little saffron, however, goes a long way in adding a rich golden tint and unusual flavor to rice, cakes, breads, rolls and soups.

We had many questions about the spices we saw. "Allspice," explained Mr. Tone, "is not a mixture of many or all spices as is commonly believed. The berry grows on a tree in Jamaica and receives its name because the flavor resembles a mixture of cloves, cinnamon and nutmeg. Its true name is pimento,

meaning pepper, because the Spanish mistakenly thought the berry to be a pepper," said Mr. Tone, who is as interested in the discovery and growing of spices as in their chemical composition.

He showed us the difference between nutmeg, the seed of a fruit grown in Indonesia and the British West Indies, and mace, which is the fleshy covering around the nutmeg kernel. Mace is identical in flavor, but lighter in color. For this reason, mace is used in dishes where dark specks would be undesirable.



Vanilla and lemon extract are stored in 40 gallon containers before bottling. Connie Miller, dietetics senior, seems dwarfed by these "little brown jugs."

SPICES

by *Pat McBride*

Dietetics Senior

After this brief introduction to extracts, spices and coffee, our group left the office to begin the tour. An elevator slowly took us to the top of the building, and as we passed each floor, a different scent floated through the elevator shaft.

Our first stop was the coffee processing department. About 6 carloads or 1,500 burlap bags of green coffee beans from Brazil, Peru and Columbia were stored here. First in the coffee processing is the removal of the "silver skin," a cellulose covering. Next, the beans are fed into two glowing roasters. When they reach the exact degree of brownness, the smoking beans are poured into large wire cooling trays. Coffee beans are dried on the ground in South America and must be separated from any foreign materials. After this process, which is called "stoning," the beans are ready for grinding and pressure-packing in cans, which is done two floors below.

Cream of Tartar from Grapes

We took the narrow stairs on our downward trip. Part of the storage area on the next floor was piled to the ceiling with tea carefully packed in aluminum foil and laminated wood boxes. Tall barrels of ground red pepper, cinnamon and nutmeg filled another corner. Mr. Tone, a chemical engineering graduate from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, pointed out a barrel from Spain containing potassium acid tartrate crystals, which were formed in the juice of grapes. These white crystals are sold as the household cream of tartar.

We passed through a room where almond extract was being bottled for shipment to retail markets in Iowa and surrounding states. Our next stop was the chemistry laboratory, which Mr. Tone established 60 years ago. The sound of pumps drew our attention to two large vats where pure vanilla extract was being made. The vanilla beans are placed in the vats with alcohol. Pumps circulate the alcohol around the beans for three weeks extracting the organic flavoring substances and the chemical, vanillin. Imitation vanilla is made by simply mixing propylene glycol with synthetic vanillin crystals, which are refined from the lignin of trees. "This vanillin," explained Mr. Tone,



Connie finds that cinnamon bark is shipped in burlap bags.

"has the same chemical structure as the vanillin from vanilla beans. However, the imitation product lacks the organic substances of the pure vanilla."

On shelves were large bottles of orange, cherry, pineapple, wintergreen, banana and maple extracts. "Anything which contains an essential oil," said Mr. Tone, "can be dissolved with the government's standard percentage of alcohol to make an extract. Vanilla extract is the most popular, with lemon and almond extract second and third in sales. Anise extract is used in making imitation licorice and cinnamon extract to flavor the old favorite candy — red hots," he said.

Cinnamon Very Perishable

As we reached the next floor, we sniffed the familiar fragrance of cinnamon and saw machines filling spice cans with the ground powder. In a "brown room," a mill and mechanical sifter were in operation grinding and sifting the rolled cinnamon bark into fine powder. The windows, floor, and every part of the machine were covered with a layer of cinnamon dust. This spice is one of the most perishable because its volatile essential oils are easily lost upon grinding. Mr. Tone suggested a small package of coarsely ground cinnamon (60 mesh) as the most economical buy for homemakers.

At the end of our downward journey, we found ourselves once again in the main office. We could have easily spent more time poking into bags from far-away places or sniffing the delicate aromas. As we left, we agreed it seemed only right that our modern spice industry should be carried on in a company as picturesque as the history and origin of spices themselves.